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The solution to New York's useless lieutenant governor position

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

New York Lieutenant Governor Robert Duffy's decision this week to bow out of a reelection run on Governor Andrew Cuomo's ticket received little attention. The timing may seem surprising, both because there is only two weeks until a replacement must be chosen and because Cuomo is a potential contender for the 2016 Democratic presidential nomination, which could result in the LG moving up to the governor's position. But Duffy was simply following in a long line of politicians unsatisfied with being a second-in-command with no power — New York's equivalent of the national vice presidency, a job John Adams famously called "His Superfluous Excellency."

What Duffy's choice brings into focus is that New York should consider changing the way it selects lieutenant governors. New York has a long and unfortunate track record with the position. By its very nature, the lieutenant governor gig is an afterthought. Currently the main part of the job, according to past occupant David Paterson, is "to wake up very early and call the governor's private line. If he answers, go back to sleep. Your work is done." This dynamic, perhaps not surprisingly, is unsatisfying to politicians whose careers have been fueled by ambition.

Cuomo will be the fourth recent governor to have to replace his LG after his first term. Two governors — Hugh Carey and George Pataki — saw their lieutenant governors become turncoats and unsuccessfully challenge them in their bid for reelection. Mario Cuomo's first lieutenant governor quit mid-term out of apparent frustration with the lack of work. Then there was Eliot Spitzer's choice, Paterson, who ended up as governor after Spitzer himself resigned midterm.

It is not like these lieutenant governors, or most of the other LGs, went on to great political success after their terms in office either. The last one to subsequently win any elective office was Mario Cuomo (Carey's second LG) in 1982. Prior to Cuomo we have to go all the way back to Herbert Lehman in 1932. In the intervening years, only two others managed to gain the party's nomination for another important race: Joseph Hanley, who ran for the Senate in 1950, and Malcolm Wilson, Nelson Rockefeller's long-serving second who moved up to the top job when Rockefeller became Gerald Ford's vice president. Wilson secured his party's nomination for governor in 1974, but was defeated by Carey, who garnered 58 percent of the vote to become the state's first Democratic chief executive in 16 years.

This track record of electoral failure is damning. The position is one that should be filled by ambitious politicians trying to get their name out to the public, not no-names selected to balance a ticket from a regional, racial or ethnic perspective. What New York should do is rethink the way it chooses lieutenant governors. This change could not only improve the quality of its LG candidates, but also could inject life into the state's moribund political practices. New York should emulate the system of 18 other states and split the ticket, allowing voters to directly elect lieutenant governors in the general election, rather than getting a handpicked lieutenant

governor foisted upon them, for whom opposing the governor means political death, and supporting the governor effectively means irrelevance.

This proposal is not a radical one considering New York's history. Prior to 1953 the state separately elected the two jobs. The rules were changed at the behest of Republican Governor Thomas Dewey, who felt that having the governor leave office (which Dewey famously tried to do twice) should not result in a change of parties in the executive chamber. On its face, this argument may seem reasonable, but since the people would be choosing the LG directly, it would be their choice to have that sword hanging over the governor's head.

There are numerous advantages to a split ticket. One of them is the chance to encourage higher quality candidates to seek the job. The LG may be an unimportant position on paper, but that can change very quickly and without warning — as David Paterson knows. Right now there is very little public vetting of the candidates. We have seen several lieutenant governors face embarrassing questions about their pasts after assuming office. An elected LG would face vetting in the crucible of electoral politics, which is likely a much more reliable gauge than the cursory look that governors seem to give their running mates.

Just as important, a directly elected lieutenant governor would have the potential — and the motive — to shake up Albany. Even with little official power, the LG would have good reason to separate him or herself from the established “three men in a room” power structure in Albany and serve as an ombudsman. The lieutenant governor would have good ample motivation to try and carve out this watchdog role — a position no one currently occupies — in order to make his or her name. This counterpoint would be especially relevant if the LG came from the opposite party as the governor.

What is clear, looking at other states, is that lieutenant governors elected under this system would be better suited to step up to the top job. The track record in other states shows that split-ticket lieutenant governors are much more likely to go on to win election to a higher office — either governor, U.S. Senator or Congress — than the lieutenant governors of the 24 states that use a same-ticket approach. Enterprising elected officials generally make for more forceful leaders.

Robert Duffy's decision to give up the lieutenant governor position may barely be remembered a few weeks from now. Based on past experience, his replacement will likely make next-to-no positive impact on the state. But it doesn't have to be that way. By following other states in separately electing a lieutenant governor, New York could at least get a candidate who wants the job and may be able to do something with it.

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